The Beast With Two Paperbacks

#1

BIG FIRST ISSUE!

THE RULES

1.
All books featured herein must be paperbacks, published before the year 2000, purchased from a physical bookshop for a price of no more than £4 UK *[or equivalent]*.

2.
Where possible, featured authors should not be widely celebrated / household name type figures (or at least, should no longer hold that status), and featured works should not currently remain in print.

3.
Rules are made to be broken.

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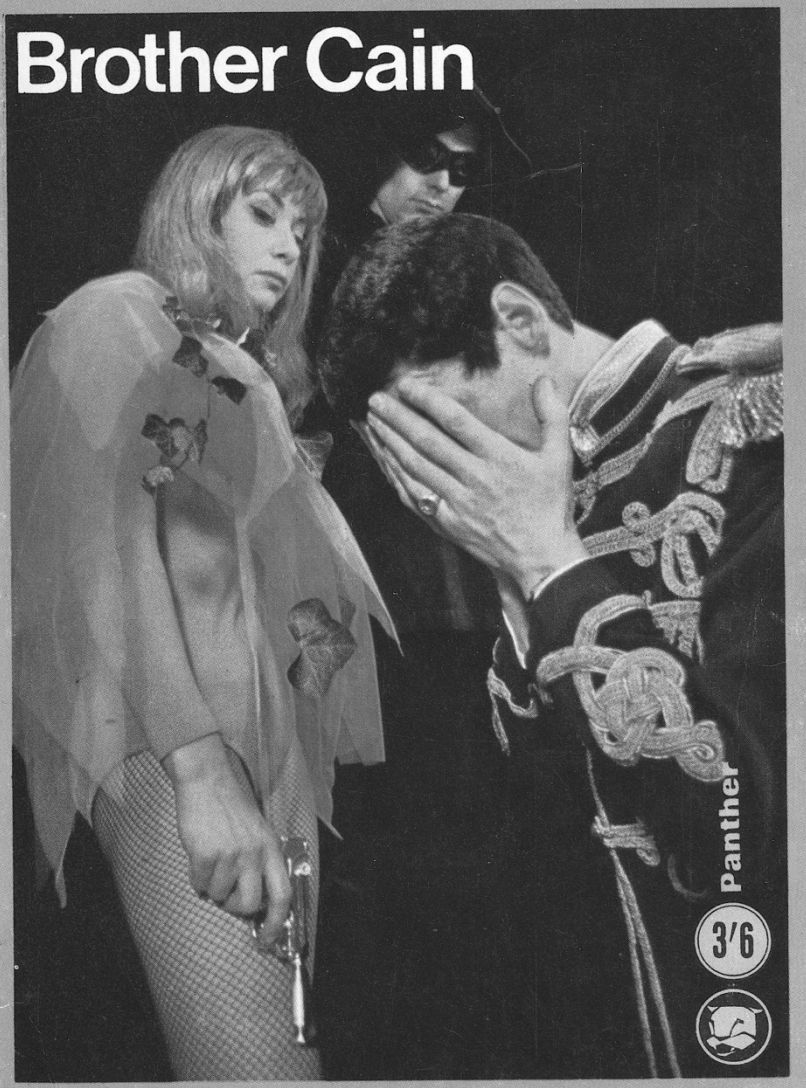
Simon Raven

Author of The Rich Pay Late



Brother Cain
by Simon Raven
(Panther, 1965)

As much as the peculiar, brightly-hued photo-cover gracing the cover of this 1965 Panther edition of Simon Raven's second novel might reflect the incoming pop art / proto-psychedelic sensibilities of that era, the text within bears only a tangential similarity to the fantastical worlds of Modesty Blaise, The Avengers and so forth - not that one suspects its author would have given a hoot either way when 'Brother Cain' first saw print back in the buttoned-down, monochrome atmosphere of 1959.

Simon Raven (1927-2001 - and yes, that was his real name) achieved both success and infamy for his efforts through the central chunk of the 20th century, but he subsequently seems to have faded into near total obscurity – and probably for good reason. An unashamedly toffee-nosed chronicler of the upper echelons of British society, his writing is entirely unconcerned with the travails of characters inconsiderate enough to have not gone to the right schools, even as he constantly rails against the cruelties which society piles upon the shoulders of members of his *own* class.

Occupying an uneasy space along the fault lines separating literary / autobiographical fiction from popular genre writing, Raven's books when read today embody a fascinating contradiction, feeling both surprisingly modern (in terms of their frank and non-judgemental approach to sexuality and all-pervading air of shark-ish cynicism) and hopelessly old fashioned (being largely concerned with a set of values and behaviours now feel totally alien, probably even to those lucky enough to have been born into its more modern iteration).

Making no secret of his bisexuality, the young Raven became a notorious figure in London's literary world during the 1950s, enjoying a reputation for his (allegedly) reckless and debauched conduct, and found himself persistently dogged by accusations of libel – seemingly as a result of his refusal to keep scandalous gossip about his peers out of print. (There is, I'm sure, a great period bio-pic just waiting to be made about his exploits.)

Raven's career as a novelist though only really took off though from 1958, when he inked an eyebrow-raising deal with publisher Anthony Blond. Basically, this contract stated that Blond would set Raven up with a cottage in the counties (in Deal in Kent, to be precise), pay him a modest weekly salary of fifteen pounds, and publish whatever he came up with - all on the understanding that Raven would *never again set foot in London*.

Once established, this unusual agreement seemingly held fast for the following three decades, allowing the exiled Raven to really get cracking on his writing, channelling his appetite for outrage primarily into the ten volumes of the 'Alms for Oblivion' cycle, comprising the epic saga of a bunch of toffs navigating the socio-political mores of post-war England, for which he is probably best known.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Raven seems to have been fixated throughout his career on the dilemmas faced by male scions of the English upper classes who, whether through conscious rebellion, lethargy or personal weakness, have squandered the privileges conferred to them by their noble upbringing, requiring them to find alternative paths through life.

This theme is certainly front and centre in 'Brother Cain', whose protagonist Jacinth Crewe (note the Moorcock-ian initials) finds himself in a predicament closely mirroring that apparently faced by the author himself just a few years beforehand.

Having been expelled from Eton on the grounds of moral turpitude, Crewe has subsequently been forced to curtail his studies at Cambridge due to what we might charitably call a self-inflicted lack of funds, and the novel joins him as he is 'invited' to offer his resignation to the British army's elite training academy at Sandhurst, having accrued gambling debts sufficiently gargantuan as to bring his entire regiment into disrepute. "Honour and dishonour are merely conventions," Captain Crewe's Commanding Officer advises him during their final interview, neatly outlining the central theme of the novel to follow. "They are relevant in the world in which you have so far existed: they will not be relevant in the world for which it is clear you are now destined."

Retreating to London with tail between his legs, Jacinth throws himself upon the mercy of his regiment's allotted merry widow, Mrs Kitty Leighton, who, after a night or two of wild passion at her Chelsea flat, places a call to a mysterious contact whom she suggests may be able to assist her disgraced and destitute lover, taking him off her hands before the debt collectors come a-knocking.

Thus, Jacinth finds himself summoned to a luncheon date at the Trocadero in Piccadilly (then reaching the end of its tenure as an actual restaurant, prior to its rebirth as the tourist-choked hellhole of more recent decades). Therein, he is greeted by dirty mac-clad, brown ale supping "professional messenger" Mr Shannon - a rare example of a working-class character in a Raven novel, whom I found it impossible not to imagine being played by Donald Pleasance at his shifty-eyed best.

Though highly suspicious on all levels, the proposal Mr Shannon's anonymous employers wish to convey to Jacinth is entirely too good for the desperate young layabout to decline. In short order, he is told, his gambling debts will be covered in full, and he will be issued with sufficient funds to allow him to fly to Rome and install himself in the swank Hotel Hassler overlooking the Spanish Steps, there to await further instructions.

What with the world being in the midst of the Cold War and everything, you'll be unsurprised to hear that when those orders do eventually arrive, they require Captain Crewe to report to a shady joint named identified as 'The Institute for the Promotion of Mediterranean Art', soon revealed to be a flimsy front for a top secret wing of British Intelligence whose job, to all intents and purposes, is to create new James Bonds.

Which is to say, Jacinth and the other young and privileged rascals corralled by the 'Institute' are pointedly *not* being groomed as spies or intelligence agents. Instead, they are basically destined to serve as covert thugs or hatchet men for the British state – specialists in what one of their instructors (who is of lower middle-class extraction, and so naturally a graceless, grudge-bearing oaf in Raven's estimation) bluntly calls "the cold art of murder".

Taking a slightly more nuanced view on things, the (reassuringly aristocratic) Big Cheese of the outfit instead waxes lyrical to his new recruits about how, in light of communist adventurism and so forth, the democratic institutions so cherished by western nations can only be preserved through the unilateral execution of acts which the champions of liberal democracy would find impossible to countenance, should they become aware of them.

(Being unfamiliar with Raven's own political views, assuming he had any, it is difficult for me to determine whether this justification for extra-judicial murder and mayhem, which continues at some length in the book, is being presented as satire, or simply as a statement of the author's own beliefs.)

Furthering the Bond parallel, Jacinth and his fellow recruits will essentially be allowed to adopt the lifestyles of globe-trotting playboys once their training has been completed, so long as they follow their orders to the letter, ask no questions, and leave whatever moral scruples they may once have possessed at the door. And, if one of their number has any thoughts of refusing the Institute's kind offer and instead ducking out to take his chances in civilian life, well…. his more ruthless classmates will simply have an easy first assignment to look forward to, won't they?

In spite of the nominal military rank he acquired at Sandhurst, Jacinth Crewe is clearly still more of a feckless dosser than a cold-blooded killer, and so, still bedevilled by confused notions of personal honour and gentlemanly conduct, he is naturally terrified by the prospect of immersing himself in the paranoid, compassionless world promised by his new profession.

His reluctance only increases when, with a neatness which surely defies mere coincidence, he is paired up for training with one Nicholas Le Soir, the former schoolmate whose charms led to Jacinth being expelled from Eton for 'corrupting the morals' of a younger boy. (An incident which directly mirrors the particulars of Simon Raven's real-life expulsion from Charterhouse public school, incidentally.)

Now a qualified surgeon, Le Soir has arrived at the 'Institute' after being struck off and effectively exiled from the UK for performing an after-hours abortion upon the daughter of a prominent Catholic MP (oops), and the plot is further thickened once Jacinth and Nicholas find themselves drawn into an embryonic love triangle with Le Nicholas's promiscuous yet sexually dysfunctional cousin Eurydice, who is also resident in Rome, working for an equally questionable 'cultural mission'…. and who seems suspiciously keen on pumping both mixed up boys for further information on the exact nature of their own new employment.

And, there I will conclude my plot synopsisin', leaving you to imagine the death-defying struggle in a bat-infested railway tunnel, the scheme to virally infect the whores of a high class brothel, and the convoluted murder plot set against the backdrop of a Venetian masked ball, which all follow in due course.

Needless to say though, Raven proves himself eminently capable of setting up a fast-moving, intriguing yarn here, exercising a muscular, page-turning style which proves s a match for any of his era's pop thriller writers, steering proceedings toward a bleakly existential conclusion, closer to the kind of internecine futility in which John le Carré would soon come to specialise than to the two-fisted, patriotic fluff beloved by Ian Fleming's fans.

Given that 'Brother Cain' was first published a full decade before the legalisation of male homosexuality in the UK meanwhile, one of the most striking aspects of the book for readers at the time of publication must have been Raven's forthright and unapologetic presentation of his male characters' bisexuality.

As in many of his more, uh, 'realistic' novels, Raven seems to relish the opportunity to drag this dark secret of the English Public School system out into the open here (a campaign perhaps instigated in response to the cowardly institutional hypocrisy around the issue which led to the author's expulsion from Eton), and in doing so, he pushes the book's content and language about as far as the era's censorship would allow.

“I’m not a homosexual, or at least, not very often,” Jacinth protests to himself as he drifts into introspective reverie during his flight to Rome. (“What shall I do about women? Well I suppose there must be brothels...,” he adds, delightfully, as if to bolster his own sense of masculinity.) But, as soon as he falls asleep, he finds himself dreaming of a beautiful American boy he briefly seduced at Cambridge (and who will, of course, play an integral role in the unfolding plot), and as the book goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that, despite his claims to the contrary, Jacinth’s most significant relationships have always been with other men.

Clearly, the parallels between the background of this book’s protagonist and that of his creator are unavoidable, to the extent that it wouldn’t be surprising to learn that many of the secondary characters in ‘Brother Cain’ are thinly veiled versions of his own friends, lovers and acquaintances, unwillingly shoehorned into the middle of a commercial espionage thriller which, for all its far-fetched excesses, can’t help but simultaneously feel like an attempt on Raven’s part to take stock of his life to date, as he hit his early thirties.

Although the author was presumably not actually press-ganged into committing top secret killings on behalf of the British crown, Crewe’s background otherwise maps almost directly onto the author’s own, and it is certainly not a great leap to see Jacinth’s recruitment by the ‘Institute’ as a reflection of Raven’s own unique arrangement with Anthony Blond.

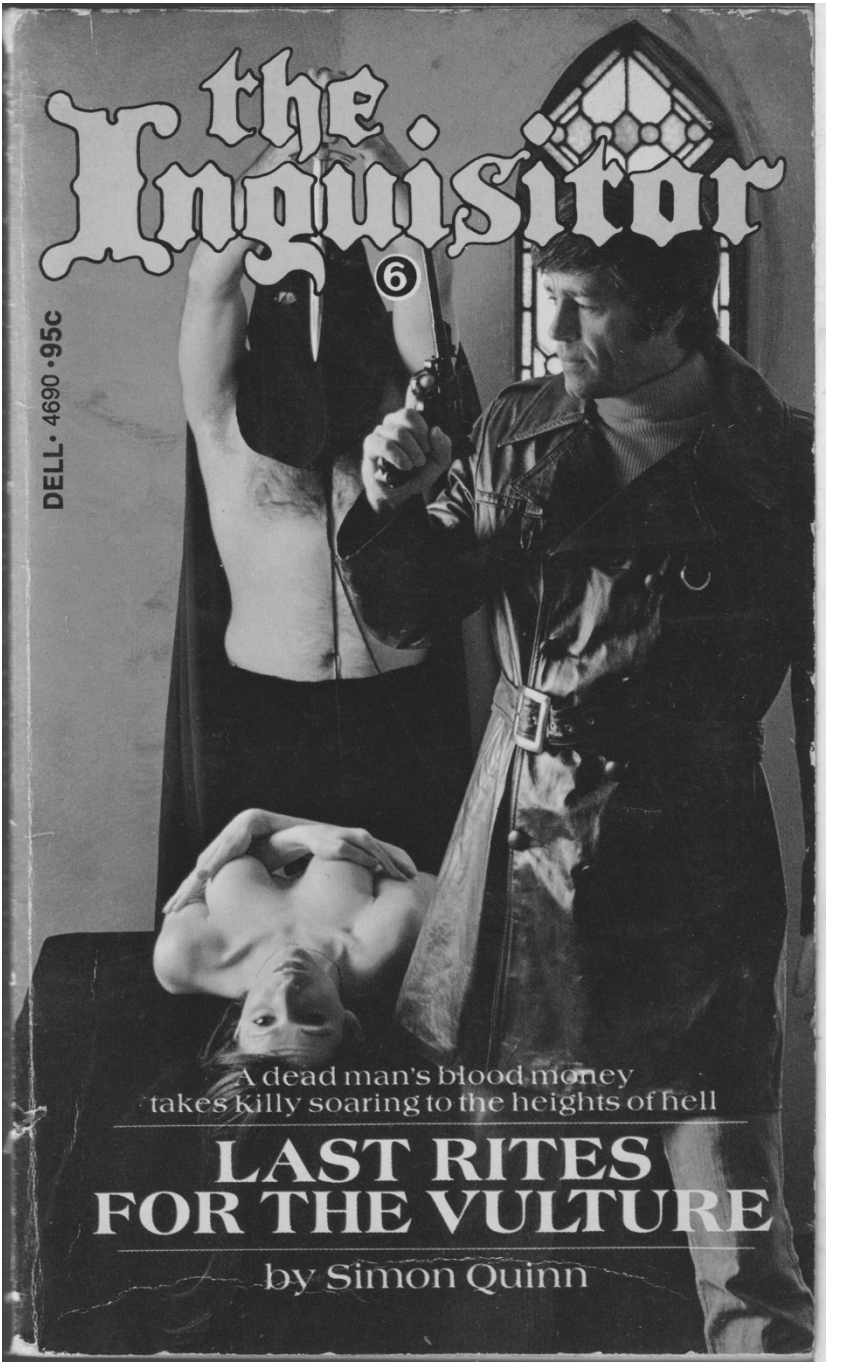
Elsewhere meanwhile, the book is packed with sinister, wisdom-dispensing potential father figures and unbalanced, mothering women, practically crying out for psychological interpretation, whilst Jacinth’s ruthless fellow agents all seem ready and willing to trample on his yearning, sensitive soul, creating a maelstrom of moral / mental angst which can only really end with our protagonist’s self-destruction, as he slips helplessly between the cracks separating his chivalrous world of ‘honour and dishonour’ from the ugly, transactional realm in which such high-minded concepts of personal dignity are merely a quaint irrelevance.

Irrespective of his jaundiced, classist perspective, Simon Raven remains such a fascinating figure, and the lost world of foppish decadence in which he seemingly dwelled such an enticing one, that I’m surprised he hasn’t

retained a greater following over the years, especially given that he was he was clearly also a gifted literary craftsman, even at this early stage in his career.

As was the case with, say, Patricia Highsmith, the unresolved personal and moral contradictions which seem to have powered Raven forward, churning through every aspect of his writing, remain provocative, and 'Brother Cain' finds him mashing up literary ambition and pop sensationalism, fantasy and autobiography, hetero and homo desire, establishment manners and youthful rebellion - all sewn perilously into the Saville Row tailoring of an appropriately mercurial fictional avatar.

An older kissing cousin perhaps to Jerry Cornelius, Philip McAlpine, Jason King, Luther Arkwright and the other conflicted sons of Albion who would emerge, gun in hand, from the whirlygig of popular culture as the changes wrought by the '60s took hold, in a distant corner of the counter-cultural imagination, the doomed Jacinth Crewe lives on.


the Inquisitor
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DELL• 4690 •95c
A dead man's blood money
takes Killy soaring to the heights of hell
LAST RITES
FOR THE VULTURE
by Simon Quinn

£1-99
C2
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The Questions

Why did two flower children murder a harmless old monk with peach blossoms?

Why was a respectable Japanese banker speared through the heart for no accountable reason?

Why did the ferociously sexy granddaughter of a would-be saint make love to the Inquisitor in a submerged, shark-infested Cadillac?

Why was Francis Xavier Killy going to gamble his life on land, on sea and in the air to protect a white-slaving, monk-killing mafioso's legacy?

"Superior entertainment!"
—Publishers Weekly

The Inquisitor # 6:
Last Rites For The Vulture
by Simon Quinn
(Dell, 1975)

You know that feeling when you pull an unassuming paperback off the shelves at Oxfam and instantly think, "ok, this is coming home with me, even if I have to fight someone for it"?

Well, as it turns out, I'm perhaps lucky that I didn't need to fight anyone for possession of 'Last Rites For The Vulture', the sixth volume in Dell Books' 'The Inquisitor' series. Little did I know it at the time (and thankfully, neither did the staff in Oxfam's Herne Hill branch), but a pretty fervent collector's scene has grown up around '70s 'men's adventure' franchise books in recent years, including within its ranks more than a few of the kind of disgruntled, hormonally imbalanced males one imagines would not be averse to a spot of bookshop fisticuffs.

Perhaps attracting additional interest from equally fervent horror fiction collectors, it's probably fair to assume that the Inquisitor books represent one of the more elusive and eccentric series within the genre, and indeed, the £1.99 I coughed up in 2015 compares well to the current online asking price of $60 plus postage - knowledge which may have helped ease my disappointment when, after initially rejoicing at the extraordinary bit of gutter pulp lunacy I had apparently unearthed, a quick skim read on the bus home initially left me a bit underwhelmed.

I had, I suppose, been naively hoping for something more in a full on horror vein, with the book's gun-toting Papal Special Agent wielding holy magickal power and battling supernatural evil, much in the manner of Guy N. Smith's uproarious 'Sabat' books, or John Steakley's much later trash blockbuster 'Vampire$' (as filmed by John Carpenter).

It soon becomes clear however that, despite the blatant horror / witch-smut come-ons of this volume's (astounding) photo cover, 'The Inquisitor' veers much closer to standard issue 'men's adventure' fare - which, for the uninitiated, basically comprises an even more psychotic boiled down

residue of Ian Fleming's James Bond formula, minus the suave, globe-trotting snobbery but spiked with an industrial strength dose of '70s pulp brutality, guaranteed to get the books covertly passed around classrooms and barracks across the globe, with the gross / rude passages carefully bookmarked.

In the years since I initially picked up 'Last Rites For The Vulture', I've developed a bit more of an appreciation for this particular form. More often than not, these books were cranked out at speed (and quite possibly *on* speed) by hard-bitten, cynical hacks playing it entirely for laughs, meaning that despite (or perhaps even as a result of) the ultra-repetitive story-telling and obligatory macho/misogynistic excesses demanded by their publishers, their 'first draft = only draft' style text often reaches delirious heights of testosterone-crazed cosmic absurdity.

Following the high stakes travails of papal hatchet man Francis Xavier Killy ("unbowed by vows of celibacy and fears of common men, he's tough, aggressive, and a master of highly original deadly arts") as he "..finds himself sexually ensnared by the wild and wickedly beautiful granddaughter of a would[be saint", and as a consequence is "relentlessly stalked by two killers out for money and blood," 'Last Rites For The Vulture' is happily no exception in this regard, as the following extent from chapter # 7 clearly indicates:

She sat up while he pushed on the door. It didn't occur to him that they could simply dive off the trunk. As soon as he did manage to shove the door open, fifty pounds of water rushed in, and a dark form seized his pants. Killy pulled the door tight and pulled his leg back as far as he could.

'It's a shark, isn't it?' he asked Alexandra with disgust.

'Yes.' She squinted into the water. 'The whole place is full of them, especially in the cannery when they dump the fish tails. They've probably been circling us ever since we landed.'

'Jesus Christ, sex on the brain, and a shark on my leg.'

‘You’re lucky, he’s a small one, push him out.’

‘You push him out.’

‘He’s your shark.’

‘Look, get the bottle. We didn’t lose the bottle, did we?’

She fished the tequila bottle from the back, carefully making sure the cap was tight.

‘Oh good’ – he applauded her – ‘we don’t want to lose any of that.’

The thing on his leg began wrestling with his pants. Its head came out of the water, showing a saucer-shaped mouth full of teeth and eyes on long gray bars that extended from the head.

‘Great, a hammerhead shark. How the hell do you push a hammerhead shark out a car door?’

‘Hit him between the eyes. That shouldn’t be so hard,’ she giggled.

He pulled his leg up. He hit his ankle first, but his second swing scored where Alexandra had suggested. As soon as his leg was free, Killy grabbed her and rolled over the seat in to the back of the car.

‘I thought you were going to throw him out,’ she complained.

‘He wants to come in, let him come in.’

‘Oh well, the tide’ll go out in the morning. We’re stuck here until then.’

‘We’re not stuck, I saved the bottle.’

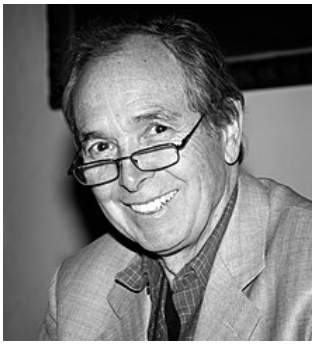
She sighed, smiled, and opened her arms for him.

After Chapter # 8 cuts to some other characters faffing about, Chapter # 9 begins with the sentence; “He woke up still inside her.”

There are no words.

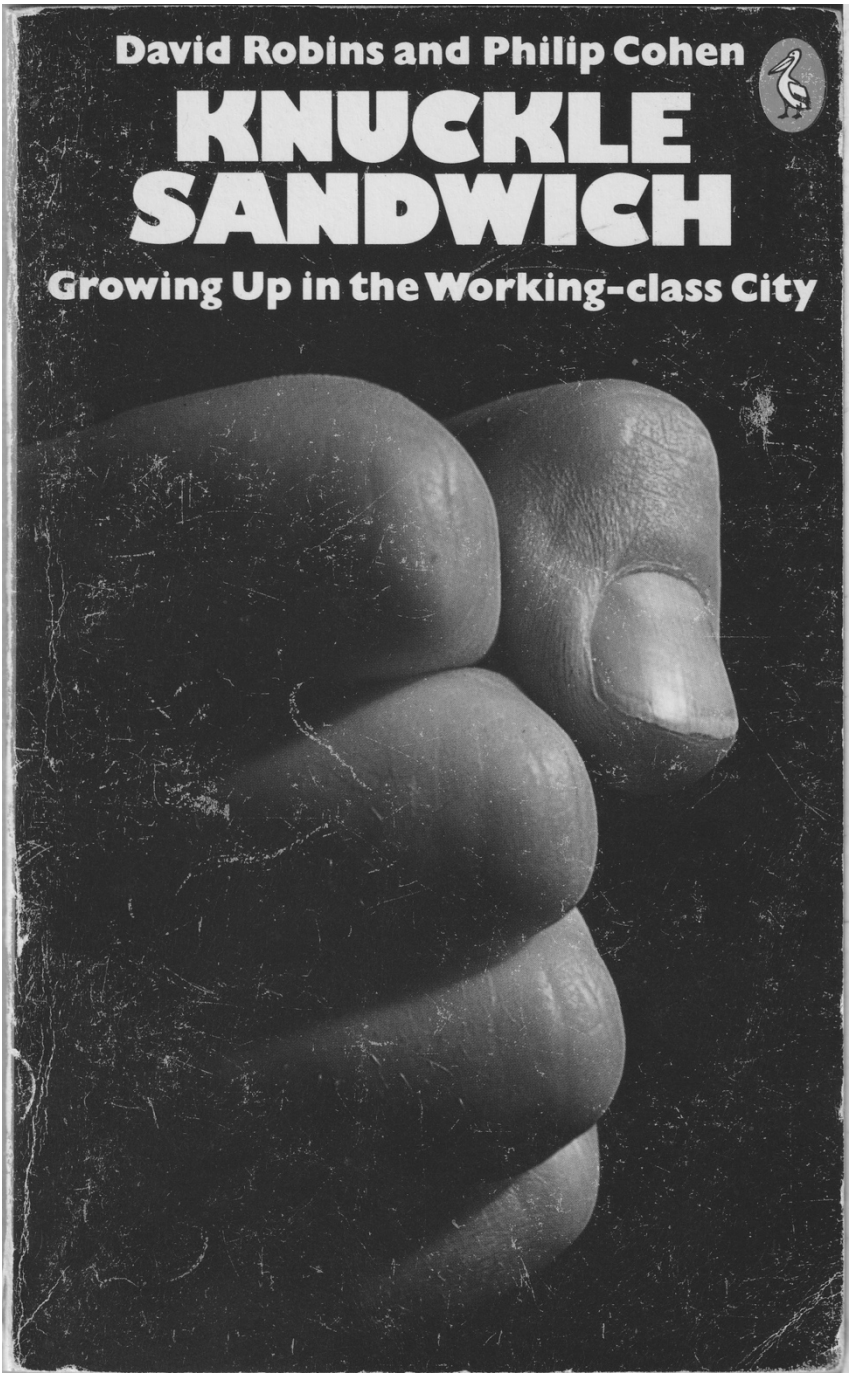
A few seconds of googling reveals that ‘Simon Quinn’ was a pseudonym used by American writer Martin Cruz Smith, who penned all six ‘Inquisitor’ books, as well as ghosting a few volumes of the seemingly never-ending ‘Nick Carter: Killmaster’ series, before proceeding to gain some slightly more legitimate acclaim under his own name, following the publication of his eco-horror novel ‘Night Wing’ in 1977 and the best-selling cold war thriller ‘Gorky Park’ in 1981.

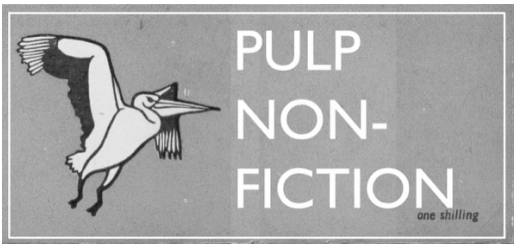
Readers are advised that trying to square the inebriated, shark-punching mayhem outlined above with the photo on the author’s Wikipedia page proves quite a trip.



THE DELL INQUISITOR SERIES:

THE DEVIL IN KANSAS
THE LAST TIME I SAW HELL
NUPLEX RED
HIS EMINENCE, DEATH
THE MIDAS COFFIN
LAST RITES FOR THE VULTURE


David Robins and Philip Cohen
KNUCKLE SANDWICH
Growing Up in the Working-class City



Knuckle Sandwich:
Growing Up in the Working-Class City
by David Robins & Philip Cohen
(Pelican, 1978)

Content warning: readers are advised that extracts quoted in the following article contain extremely unpleasant racial & homophobic slurs, the inclusion of which I hope can be viewed within the context of the era / issues under discussion.

Surely the most punk rock book ever published under the blue-spined auspices of Penguin's Pelican imprint, 'Knuckle Sandwich' even manages to incorporate a quotation from The Clash's 'What's My Name?' as part of its back cover blurb - a pretty on-trend move for an academic-adjacent publication in 1978, you'd have to say.

Readers seeking a fresh insight into the spikes n' safety pins era however would be advised to look elsewhere, as the events recounted herein by David Robins and Philip Cohen actually took place entirely in 1972-74, a fair tube journey away from the contrived outrages of the Kings Road, in a thinly anonymised version of a council housing estate located somewhere in North London.

In fact, the book's potential socio-historical value is somewhat undermined by the authors' decision to present their work primarily as a dry sociological text, with all names changed to protect the innocent, and all geographic and cultural specifics carefully filed off, as the text aspires to provide something of a universal guide to strategies for managing the lives of young people within urban environments.

As such, it is sometimes difficult to drill down into the finer detail of the communities and localities depicted, or to join the dots with the wider history of London during this era, but nonetheless - the fact that the book's fictionalised 'Monmouth Estate' forms part of a group of purpose-built, post-war housing projects named after parts of Wales, and that the young residents are all fanatical Arsenal supporters, should help North London specialists pin down its real life counterpart without too much difficulty, I should imagine.

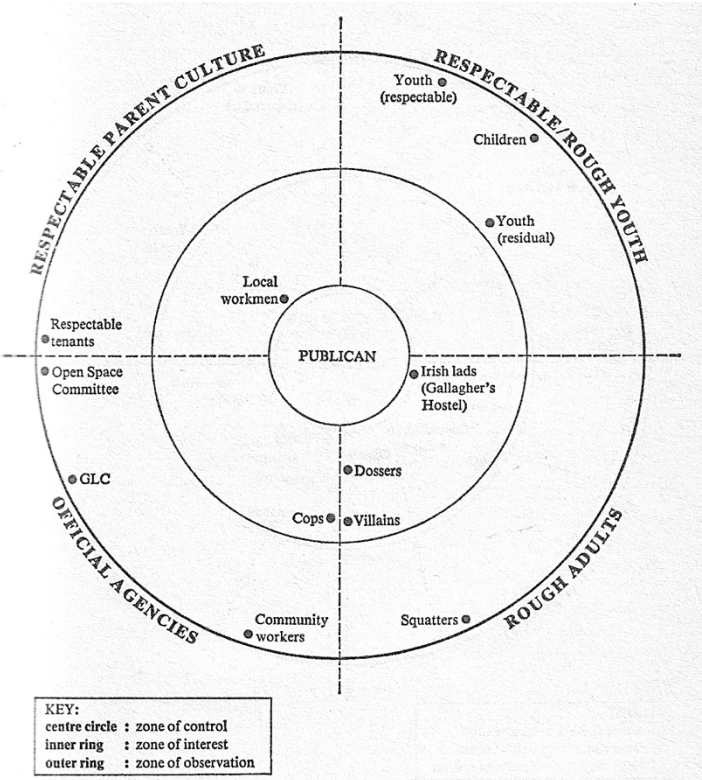
Indeed, for all their pretence of scientific distance, the street level reality of the raw and lively stories Robins & Cohen end up recounting here can't help but punch through their text pretty strongly, especially once it becomes clear that the authors themselves were fairly central to the action, in their role as part of a group of well-meaning socialist university graduates / squatters who worked with the estate's Residents' Association and sundry other powers-that-be in order to establish a disco for local teenagers in the shell of a recently abandoned pub, here named The Black Horse - a tale chronicled in exhaustive detail in the first section of 'Knuckle Sandwich'.

Like true-blooded sociologists, Robins & Cohen have produced some wonderful, baffling diagrams to help illustrate the shifting interests of proximities of different factions aroused by this endeavour. As you will note, this is very much sociology via a script conference for The Sweeney, incorporating such distinct demographic groups as 'villains', 'Irish lads' and, my personal favourite, 'dossers'.

Alas, poor dossers! Briefly mentioned in the text as occupying the underworld-affiliated 'Gallagher's Hostel' (HQ of the aforementioned 'Irish lads'), they seem to abruptly disappear following the completion of the first stage of activity at The Black Horse - presumably driven away by all the unsettling industriousness taking place adjacent to their turf and forced to seek out a more sedate environment in which to pursue their dossing.

Long story short, the squatters/sociologists (now rechristened as the 'Youth Group') eventually get their disco up and running with the help of

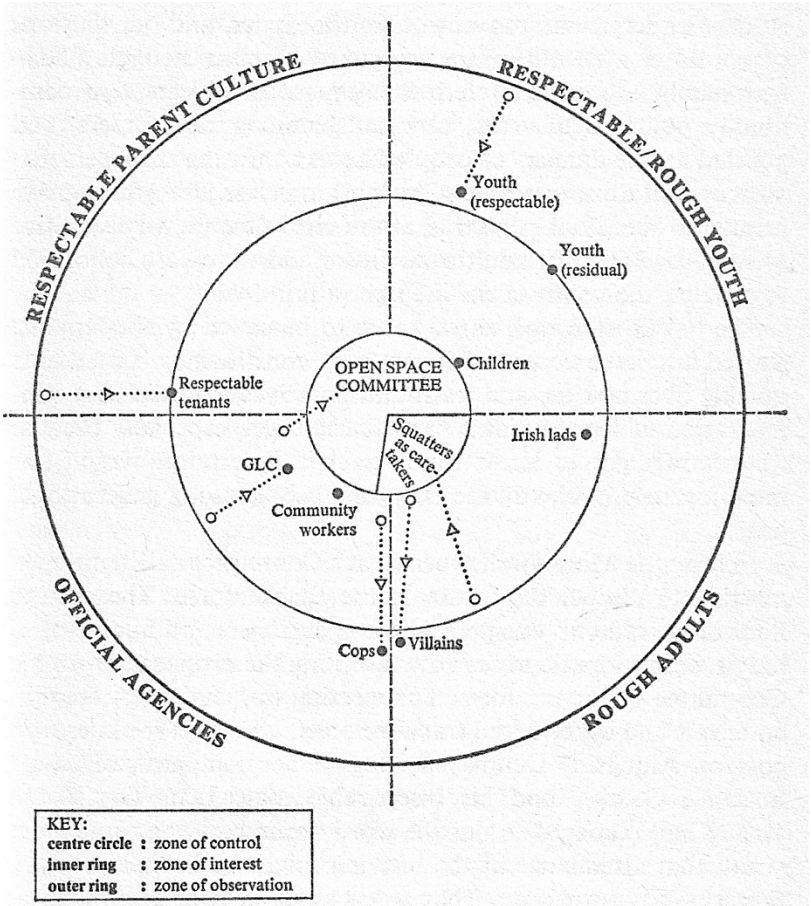
the local youngsters, but maintaining order and keeping the project on track proves a tough gig, to put it mildly.



Black Horse: Public house (September 1972).

Misbehaviour and violence perpetrated by a minority of the more troubled attendees, constant static from concerned parents and the Tenants' Association, a barely tolerant attitude from the cops, the looming shadow of gang / criminal activity, and the general problem of how best to try to channel the energies of a room full of rampaging, economically deprived teenagers into constructive decision-making - all of these challenges are chronicled in detail herein, and all contributed to the premature demise of the disco, which reportedly closed its doors following a violent and acrimonious final night of operation in April 1974, and subsequently lost

said doors altogether when the building was firebombed by persons unknown a few weeks later.



Black Horse: Squatted (March 1973).

From this section of the book, I was naturally most interested in harvesting precisely the kind of detail which the authors deliberately seek to avoid - e.g., specifics on the kind of stuff the disco's young patrons were into, what music got played, who took responsibility for playing it, what kind of fashions held sway at the disco and so on.

Thankfully, a chapter entitled 'Whatever Happened To The Teenage Dream?' finally begins to deliver the goods in this regard, recounting the authors' attempts to launch a 'junior' version of their disco for the estate's pre-teens - an account regrettably delivered with an industrial strength dose of only-in-the-Seventies cringe:

So the demand for a junior disco was more complex than it first appeared. In fact it concealed two, distinctly antagonistic demands: the girls wanted to start a local chapter of the Donny Osmond Fan Club; the boys wanted a cross between an indoor adventure playground and the North Bank terrace at Arsenal. So when the doors were opened, the organizers found they had *two* distinct clubs which just happened to coincide at the one time and place. The boys swarmed all over the place, swung from the lights, held races across tables and chairs, savaged the football machine and had impromptu bundle fights on the floors, all this interspersed with much North Bank football chanting. They came in scruffy and came out looking – as one mum put it – 'like they've been out in a spin dryer'.

But the girls . . . ! Dressed to the nines in their best party clothes, and the latest teen fashion. Here and there a hint of eye shadow and deft application of mum's Chanel No. 5. At the first bars of 'Long Haired Lover' they 'took' the dance floor, and remained there for the rest of the evening as if hypnotized, impervious to the boys' bedlam; ten-year-old seductive swaying bottoms, rolling hips – a completely convincing imitation of teenage discosex. Mostly, the boys ignored them, but from time to time, the chant would go up from the North Bank: 'Donny's a poofta, Donny's a poofta.'* To which the girls would inevitably chorus, 'Charlie's a wanker' (i.e. Charlie George, the footballer).

Another issue which piqued my interest meanwhile was a a few paragraphs dealing with the Youth Group's attempts to revive the disco's fortunes by booking live bands. As a music fan, I'd be genuinely fascinated to know what kind of acts were taking the stage in a grass-roots, working class venue such as this, prior to the emergence of the pub-rock and home-grown reggae acts who began to make their names in this kind of environment a few years later. Naturally no specifics are forthcoming from Robins & Cohen, but we do at least get a few nice vignettes on how things went down at The Black Horse once 'groups' were added to the equation;

After the first big opening night at the Black Horse, membership began to fall off – fewer people each week attracted fewer people the next. The Youth Group tried desperately to reverse this process by improvising a Sense of Occasion. Dance competitions, raffles, a Christmas party with a live band. The success of the band raised the demand, especially from the boys, to have a live band every week. So live music came to the Black Horse, and once again membership snowballed.

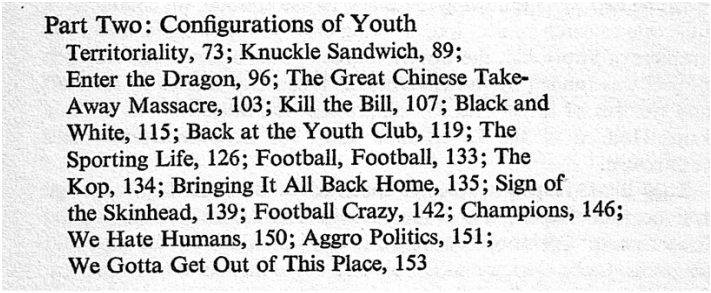
The regular core of girls were less enthusiastic about this development. The music of many of the groups was more suitable for listening to than for dancing to. Formation dancing is its own live performance, and the arrival of the musicians threated to steal the show. Sometimes there were even requests from the girls to 'turn them off' or 'put another one on', just like a record. Girls also tended to be more 'Top of the Pops' orientated, while many of the boys aspired to more sophisticated tastes – progressive, reggae, and rhythm and blues.

But above all the boys tended to appreciate more fully than the girls the aspect of *performance* that the bands brought to the Black Horse. Many identified directly with the 'macho' pose and stance of the young musicians; there was never any shortage of volunteers to help set up the electronic hardware. On one occasion, however, the musicians tried to exploit the situation by exhortations from the stage to 'get it on' and strip off! The kids' response to this subcultural attack was to close ranks and drown out the band in a chorus of repartee. The band had seriously misread the expectations of their audience. Taking the repartee for personal insult they got increasingly uncomfortable and finally stalked off the stage.

In 'Knuckle Sandwich's second section, 'Configurations of Youth' (whose chapter headings read like a track listing for the best Oi album ever, incidentally), the authors depart from their central narrative, and begin using data gathered during their time at The Black Horse to explore a range of wider themes deemed relevant to the experience of inner city youth in the UK during the mid-1970s.

As you might imagine, chief amongst these themes is football and the culture surrounding it - a subject which Robins & Cohen tackle with admirable depth and detail. Pre-figuring (and perhaps pre-emptively critiquing?) the over-familiar media narratives of '80s-era hooliganism, this is fascinating stuff, albeit a bit outside my own sphere of interest. As

such, I will restrict my commentary to simply noting that, if you happen to be '70s footie historian, or maintain an interest in the history of Arsenal's fan culture in particular, this book is worth its weight in gold - track it down forthwith.



Part Two: Configurations of Youth
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More my bag meanwhile is the chapter of the book dedicated to that more quintessentially mid '70s cultural craze: KUNG FU.

Spiritingly for 21st century fans of vintage martial arts cinema, the authors' research here suggests that the veritable tsunami of enthusiasm for the subject generated by Bruce Lee and his legacy was just as much of a game-changer for the kids on the 'Monmouth' and 'Denby' estates as rose-tinted recollections of the '70s martial arts boom tend to claim it was for working class youth across the globe.

It has become something of a cliché for those recollections to assert that the 'underdog kicks back against oppressors' narratives of Hong Kong martial arts movies struck a chord with under-privileged and minority audiences wherever they were screened in the early '70s, and Robins & Cohen contribute to this trend by rather tenuously attempting to draw a line between the plot-line of Bruce Lee's 'Fist of Fury' (1971) and the subsequent emergence of gang-like "fighting crews" on the London estates.

Delightfully, Robins & Cohen also reproduce a poem in tribute to Bruce Lee, apparently written by a thirteen-year-old girl from one of the estates. ("Not a bad bit of writing," they charitably note);

Tribute to Bruce Lee
When you were young, you used to roam
the streets and alleys of Hong Kong
You learn't your martial arts and then
you tried it out on everywun.

You led a gang or so they say
and terrorized the town
a rebel you will always be
nowun can keep you down

Your dead i know I've seen the proof
your image still lives on
you're worshipped now throughout the world
even tho youre gone

The waterfronts you used to go
to fight and show your skill
you always wun cos youre the guy
nowun could ever kill

You never thought of death i know
cos death woud mean defeat
and thats the thing you never knew
how to win or beat.*

In order to back up their ruminations with some quantitative data, the authors apparently carried out a survey of 330 letters received by the editors of UK-based 'Kung Fu Monthly' magazine, and their findings are eye-opening, to say the least;

Age: 7–14 17%, 15–21 69%, 21 and over 14%

Sex: Male 62%, Female 38%

Ethnic origins (*parents*): West Indian 31%, Asian 28%, Greek or other immigrant 18%, UK 27%

Social class (*parents*): Professional and Managerial 4%, Skilled manual/ White collar 35%, Unskilled manual/White collar 61%

Total estimated readership of *Kung Fu Monthly*: 285,000.

Given that, when ethnicity data was collected for the first time in the 1981 UK census, 96% of the nation's populace still identified as 'white', the fact that *73%* of Kung Fu Monthly's correspondents hailed from non-white or immigrant families (and at least 61% from working class backgrounds) seems absolutely extraordinary - certainly a powerful affirmation of the oft-repeated "kung fu appealed to oppressed minorities" narrative. (It's also nice meanwhile to see that 38% of correspondents were female,

despite the ostensibly macho nature of the magazine's subject matter, but… that's another story, I suspect.)

This leads us neatly on to the subject of race, which initially seems like a bit of an elephant in the rumpus room of 'Knuckle Sandwich's text. Throughout the first section of the book, I found myself wondering about the ethnic make-up of the communities Robins & Cohen were discussing, only to gradually realise that (in keeping with the majority of writing from this era), the subjects of the text are assumed to be white, unless stated otherwise.

In fairness to the authors though, they do increasingly begin to address issues around race as the book goes on, framing a narrative around the interaction (or lack thereof) between the estate kids and a neighbouring black youth centre (named as 'Uhuru' in the text), whose existence prompts a mixture of suspicion and outright prejudice from the Youth Group's constituents, combined with a heavy dose of jealousy inspired by the fact that the Uhuru centre is seen as better organised, better equipped and more supportive to its attendees than anything the white community is able to offer.

These attitudes cross over directly into the kids' aforementioned obsession with kung fu and street fighting too. In keeping with the usual stereotypes, the Uhuru kids are reputed to be far more advanced and dedicated fighters than their Caucasian counterparts (whose playground-fu skills remain, I suspect, very much on the Carl Douglas level). Thus, an unhappy dose of fear and self-loathing is added to the list of factors perpetuating racial division, prompting the following depressing exchange;

> We arrived one summer evening to find our 'clients' in their usual station by the Cross Keys. 'We're off to the black youth centre. You coming?' Embarrassed silence. One or two of the group detach themselves and start to melt away into the shadows. 'What about you, Doughnut?' 'What, me? Go in there with all those jungle bunnies?' Looks to mates for support. His mates solidarize with a chorus of racist repartee. More Wall habitués melt into the shadows. Until finally we are left with the vociferous Doughnut, his mate Greek Angelo, and their girls. We appeal to

the girls, who seem quite keen to make the visit. Doughnut: 'If you go in there with those jungle bunnies, then don't bother to speak to me again.' All this was going on in the presence of a young West Indian boy who lived on Denby, hung out on the Wall with the rest, and was close mates with quite a few. A split perception. They might call him Sambo to his face, but 'he's OK, he's one of us'.

So the refusal of the Monmouth boys to visit Uhuru had a more complex rationale than simple racial prejudice. As we tried to show earlier, the breakdown of any stable subcultural identity of their own, coupled with the erosion of many of the traditional supports of the parent culture, meant that they felt particularly threatened by the presence of any cohesive socio-cultural grouping. This was what the black kids at Uhuru represented. Moreover, black youth had already wrested the title of hardest fighters around from their Irish predecessors – and precisely by mastering the superior techniques of unarmed combat which the Wall could emulate only in fantasy. The notion of entering black territory armed with nothing more than a video camera broke all known rules. It could be seen as nothing but a prelude to humiliation. The presence of the girls further complicated the issue. To have to show up their lack of expertise in the martial arts, in front of them, was the final insult. Still less did they want to reveal their wider apprehensions.

Leaving such issues unresolved, the next section of 'Knuckle Sandwich' (grandly titled 'Fighting the New Nihilism') finds the authors returning to more familiar Pelican territory as they trudge through such wearisome tutorial discussion topics as 'Educational Groups: A Modest Proposal' and 'The Youth Newspaper: A Case in Point'.

Far more interesting for our purposes here are several other instances in which the authors draw on extended case studies in order to demonstrate the different paths through which kids from the estates may begin to engage with the wider world as they get older. Well written, and probably the most engaging part of the book for the casual reader, these 'case studies' veer into borderline fictional territory, often resembling outlines for potential scripts or novels. My favourite of these was the tale of 'Scottie', which reads like a treatment for the best film Ken Loach never made;

Scottie

Scottie lived with his mum and dad in a flat in Cambria House on the Monmouth. Dad, a seaman from Hong Kong who had come to England as a kid, had a habit of walking out of home every few years. Scottie was very close to his mum. An only son, who could relieve her bitterness over her husband. A popular lad, quiet but sociable. And hard. In his late teens, dressed sharp. Good-looking. Popular with the girls. The final year at school had become increasingly irrelevant to his new career of disco habitué and 'bird-puller'. Left school. Got a job in a warehouse.

Problems at work. But his new career on the Scene grew by leaps and bounds. His seventeenth birthday saw a hectic graduation into The West End rhythm and blues club scene, and a flirtation on the fringes of hippy flower-power. Got into drugs, pills, dex, hash. Flamboyant in dress, to put it mildly. Dressing up has always been a working-class thing, but the working-class London semi-hippy is something else again. Gold earrings, waist-length hair, leather pants, medallions, make-up the lot. And loads of girls. However, by nineteen, 'work hassles', and the deepening crisis at home, finally caught up and took their toll.

Scottie, the Golden Boy with a self-image of that description actively nurtured by his mum, who was now alone again, was now Scottie the Bad Son who was just like his dad and didn't want to be with his mother any more. He grew very depressed, especially at home. He went to the Out Patients at General Hospital. What's the matter with you, son? I dunno. Near to tears. Take these, one a day. Three if necessary. Come back if they don't work. With the loss of his job and in the throes of an emotional crisis, his career on the West End club scene came to an unhappy end. Scottie convalesced among his own people. Class convalescence, 'in dear old dirty Holloway', as he once put it. The milieu would sentimentally nurse his wounds. He took up with his old school mates again: two brothers, quiet, cautious lads, who were his best friends at school and were now working in the local butcher's. *They* had hardly been out of the borough in their lives. They supported Orient every week. They were well known to the mothers in the area – the butcher's boys. Conservative in dress, without being old-fashioned. 'It's not what you wear, the important thing is to be smart and clean.' The brothers welcomed Scottie home with wordless satisfaction, and they drank together every night in their local. This was Scottie's new routine. A quiet drink and a chat of an evening with his old mates. A colony of

students from the polytechnic who lived near by were about the only other youthful patrons of this run-down old pub, and they and their numerous friends made their presence felt. The scene was set for Scottie's next sojourn into subcultural hinterland.

Scottie and the brothers started to get to know the students. The brothers shared the older regulars' latent hostility towards these invaders. There were frequent debates over attitudes to work, sex, drugs. Everyone enjoyed the arguments, but Scottie was less involved. His experiences had taken him into the company of far freakier people. Scottie grew particularly close to one of the students, Kathy, and slept with her. He thought about going to college himself – a vague fantasy with no lasting pull and little to back it up. Instead, he started to live the life of a student without actually being one. With Kathy, Scottie had time and encouragement to reflect on his life. Total reintegration with his old mates was impossible for him now. He moved out of his home and into a flat with Kathy and some of her friends. 'Not a hippy, not a freak scene, well what is it? They're educated but they defy authority'. Scottie absorbed the anger towards authority of these student militants; he even went along to a couple of demos. But he could never in a million years square their talk of the revolutionary potential of the working class with his own native grasp of the community.

Scottie's moving out of home deeply upset his mother. He was escaping again. As for the brothers, his best and most loyal mates – 'he's a great bloke, he is, whatever he does'. They were saddened, though, and bitter, as they sensed which way he was drifting, away from them and their local life. Scottie seemed strained in their company. There was little to talk about. OK they were his mates, but the students and Kathy have *interests*. Besides, the brothers 'will always be around when you need them.'

Scottie never quite fitted in among the students. His appearance grew progressively stranger. He was most happy not with his mates, not with his mum, not in his new job rejecting ice creams at Walls, but with the more disturbed elements of the student community. His relationship with Kathy grew strained. Back down to the Out Patients again. This was followed by a series of court appearances – breach of the peace, drunk and disorderly, obstructing the highway. Back home to an embittered mother in Cambria House. Sat in father's chair, 'looks a bit like his dad' – watching telly defiantly. Gradually back down to the local again. The barman pours him an unsmiling pint. And the students? Just one more transient group in an area with a long tradition of transience.

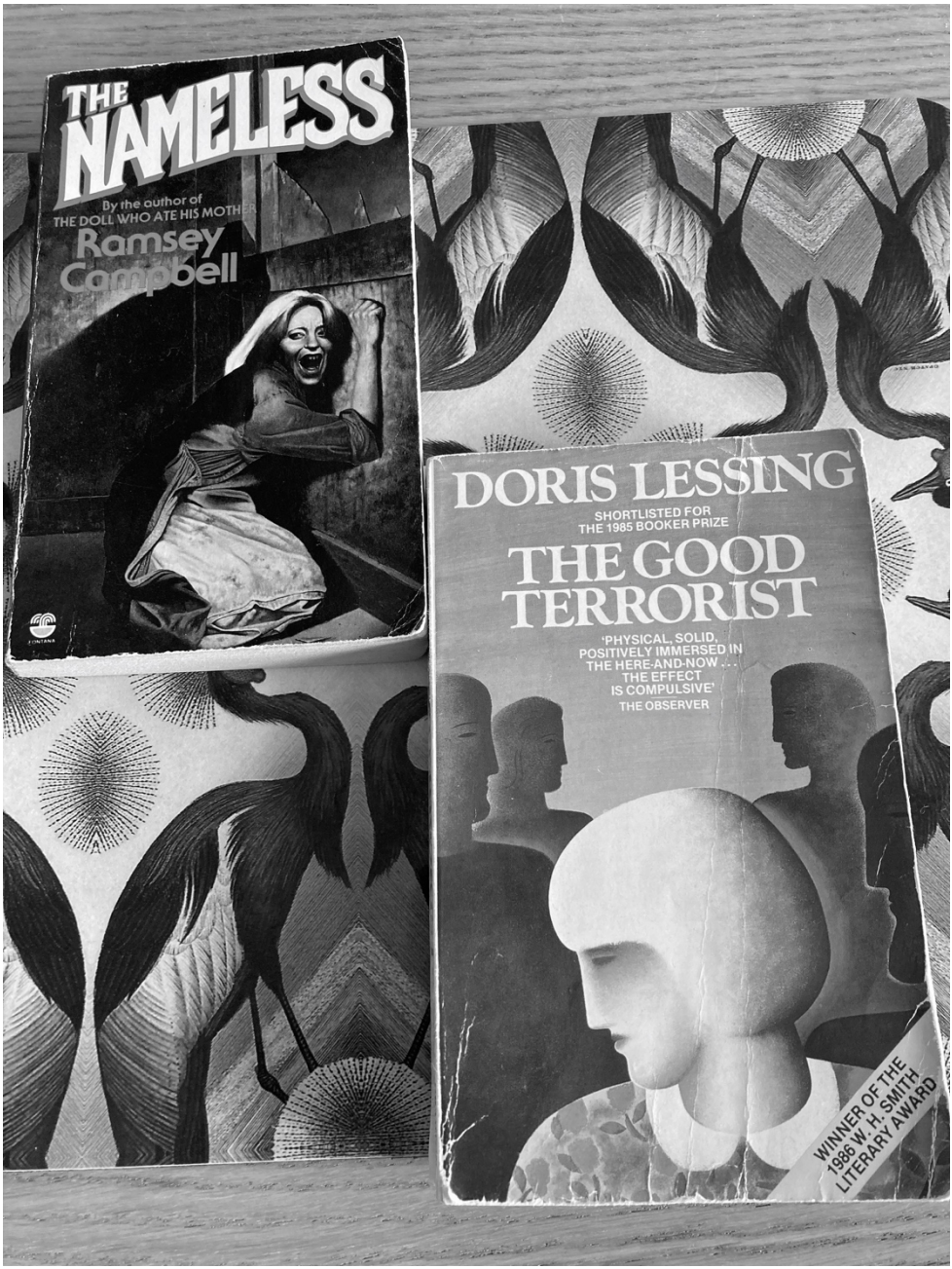
In the closing ‘Postscript: Figures in a Political Landscape’, Robins & Cohen introduce us to one lad (identified here as ‘Glenn Ford’ - apparently his father was a big movie fan back in the ‘40s), whose dissatisfaction with his factory job leads him first toward trade unionism, and subsequently active involvement of the Youth Communist League. He subsequently becomes bitterly disillusioned with political activism though, once he realises that the League’s hierarchy seem more concerned with boosting the circulation of their newspaper and pedantically accusing each other of Trotskyism than in engaging with the shop floor level issues he wishes to see addressed.

Glenn’s tale is contrasted with that of one Barry Watts, five years his junior, who, motivated by very much the same kind of baseless fears and jealousies outlined above, becomes an agitator for the National Front, and, as per the account printed here, proceeds to have a jolly old time of it, happily preaching race hatred to his parents, spitting at mixed race couples on the street and so forth to his heart’s content.

“Today, the YCL and other left wing organisations are more invisible to kids than they ever were,” Robins & Cohen opine in their closing paragraph. “Images or violence and disorder replace dreams and hopes of a better life. Racism, not revolution, is in the air.”

Well, cheers for that lads.

Let’s just hope the nation’s youth can be dragged in a more positive direction shall we, as the optimistic post-war, progressive spirit which brought us Pelican books in the library, well-funded youth clubs and forward-thinking / non-linear education programmes marches boldly on into the gleaming new era of… the 1980s? Oh shit.


THE NAMELESS
By the author of
THE DOLL WHO ATE HIS MOTHER
Ramsey Campbell
FONTANA
DORIS LESSING
SHORTLISTED FOR
THE 1985 BOOKER PRIZE
THE GOOD TERRORIST
'PHYSICAL, SOLID, POSITIVELY IMMERSED IN THE HERE-AND-NOW . . . THE EFFECT IS COMPULSIVE'
THE OBSERVER
WINNER OF THE 1986 W. H. SMITH LITERARY AWARD

Squat of Nightmares:
Doris Lessing vs Ramsey Campbell

In purely aesthetic terms, you'd be hard-pressed to find two 1980s UK paperbacks more diametrically opposed than these two.

It's easy to imagine them glowering at each other across the shelves of some small town WH Smiths, secure in the knowledge that they will never find themselves pressed together 'tween the hands of the same customer - let alone ogled side by side in some wretched fanzine four decades later.

With its murky, tomb-mould colour scheme, generic-bordering-on-meaningless title and uncredited cover illustration depicting a woman apparently in the thrall of some kind of horrendous ordeal, Ramsey Campbell's fourth novel 'The Nameless' (Fontana, 1981) is evidently a remnant of the numberless hordes of black-spined horror titles which crammed the shelves of less snobby booksellers from the late '70s through to the late '90s, servicing a rapt constituency of bloodthirsty nerds, nervous sales clerks and ill-kempt teenagers, bending covers and cracking spines in their relentless search for shocks.

Give it a second glance though, and, for the connoisseur of such material, there is already something a bit *off* about Fontana's presentation of 'The Nameless'. For a start, none of the cover's lettering is shiny or embossed (usually a must for this kind of venture), whilst the cover painting, blue-green rather than cloaked in black as per genre convention, has a naïve, hand-crafted quality to it which is genuinely rather distressing, emphasising the agony of the female subject over anything more obviously saleable / supernatural.

Are these signs, perhaps, that the publishers were aware they were dealing here with something slightly removed from the Brian Lumleys or Frank Herberts of this world? Did a rare moment of insight inspire someone in Fontana's design team to dial the presentation back accordingly? Who knows.

Whatever the case, such minor tweaks would have made precious little difference to the morally upstanding, socially responsible majority of the

‘80s readership, who would of course have given this filth a wide berth, keeping eyes front and excising the unsavoury lures of Smiths’ ‘Horror’ section from existence, much in the same way they’d likely traverse the obstacle presented by an alky writhing with DTs outside on the high street.

Reaching the reassuring, white n’ beige-spined safety of the General Fiction section, said readers might well have breathed a sigh of relief and turned browsing eyes straight in the direction of something like Doris Lessing’s ‘The Good Terrorist’ (Grafton, 1986), a curious and rather divisive late career highlight from one of Britain’s most esteemed novelists - and winner of the 1986 W.H. Smith Literary Award, no less.

In spite of the title’s implication of violence, ‘The Good Terrorist’ hit paperback wrapped in an ostensibly placid, pastel-hued cover which, curiously, evokes a similar sense of disquiet to the Campbell cover when considered for any length of time.

A tasteful bit of quintessentially 1980s illustration work from artist Paul Leith, this image is troubling in a subtler manner, as the anonymous, Easter Island-esque figures in the background crowd in upon the central female figure, blocking her way yet directing their gaze away from her, passing by without acknowledging her presence.

Working an easy visual shorthand for alienation and loneliness, Leith’s cover represents an example of a highly period-specific, quasi-‘primitive’ art style which will forever remind me of the racks of leaflets which used to attract my attention during long waits at the doctor’s surgery as a child, offering calm, medically specific yet harrowingly ‘official’ advice on everything from clinical depression to mouth ulcers.

Turning (finally) to the novels themselves, reading both in quick succession last year, I was struck by just how much they have in common - not just in woolly, thematic terms, but through the similarities with which both Lessing and Campbell employ a near-identical nexus of images and ideas, specifically relating to abandoned buildings, (sub)urban decay and the culture of squatting in the UK during the 1980s, each author giving voice to a tightly-packed kernel of fears around these issues which were

presumably shared by a wide swathe of their readerships, irrespective of which section of the bookshop they preferred to lurk about in.

The sense of crossover between the two books is heightened by the fact that, although Ramsey Campbell may have been spent his career doggedly soldiering on in the horror trenches, his prose (as anyone who has read much of it will be well aware) constantly strives toward a denser, more expressionistic and more formally experimental style than that employed by his genre contemporaries, often lapsing into passages of billowing, nebulous vagary which find him veering closer to the stereotype of impenetrable 'literary' fiction than anything found in the more grounded, direct and psychologically nuanced approach favoured by Lessing.

Combine this tendency with the drab, resolutely familiar settings within which his stories take place, and, taken out of context, Campbell's prose could easily be mistaken for that of some broadsheet-acceptable striver determined to crack the Booker Prize long list… were it not of course for all the blood-curdling Lovecraft/James-derived supernatural nasties he is contractually obliged to wedge into every non-Euclidian corner of his rain-lashed Gloucestershire hinterlands.

Turning to Lessing meanwhile, 'The Good Terrorist' finds the future Nobel Prize recipient mid-way through her sixth decade, making a long-anticipated return to the steadfast, socially conscious realism for which she is best known, having spent the preceding six years baffling critics with a sequence of mystically-inclined science fiction books (the 'Canopus in Argos' series, 1979-83).

Less the comforting return to form some may have hoped for however, '..Terrorist' was actually seen more as a bold step into uncertain terrain for Lessing upon publication, as it finds her persuasively exploring the lives and identities of characters belonging to a considerably younger generation than those she had previously concentrated upon.

Furthering a tendency to incorporate genre fiction tropes into her storytelling, 'The Good Terrorist' also finds Lessing invoking the "house as mirror of its inhabitants" jive of old school gothic horror, in the process extracting cringy feelings of physical disgust from her readers which

Campbell would surely have appreciated, before finally allowing the narrative to drift into the realm of a lackadaisical paranoid/espionage thriller during its final act.

Really though, what unites these books is less a matter of literary/genre slippage, and more the shared sense of apprehension both authors clearly felt about THAT HOUSE ON THE CORNER OF THEIR STREET, be it in Merseyside, Merton Park or Notting Hill.

You know the one, I'm sure. It's slightly bigger than the other houses on the street, still semi- detached, but with a slightly bigger front garden, and, crucially, right next to the main road. By the early '00s, it will most likely have been totally refurbed and renovated and sold for a packet to a jolly middle class family who will all happily live there till kingdom come - but back in the '80s, things were different. The noise and fumes from the road, the eye-watering upkeep costs, an unresolved inheritance dispute after the previous occupant, who'd lived there since before the war, dropped dead sans will - these issues have conspired to leave the place was empty, dilapidated and filthy. Soot-coated windows, crumbling brickwork, curtains that never move. Malodorous, fly-tipped junk accumulating out the front, and the steady cacophony of traffic safely muffling the sound of anything that may or may not be going on inside. What a state. Someone should do something about it. Can't the council step in?

What kind of faces might Doris or Ramsey have seen (or thought they had seen) peeking from between those fly-blown curtains, as they walked past with the dog, or on their way to the shops? And what recent scare stories - gleaned from the day's papers, or muttered of darkly by locals - might they have connected them with?

'The Good Terrorist' gets to the point fairly promptly. Alice and her closeted, uncommunicative not-quite-boyfriend Jasper (don't ask) have arrived at THE HOUSE, having recently been ejected from the home of Alice's mother, whom (it later transpires) they have effectively bankrupted through their persistent malingering.

Both dedicated members of a loose outfit called the Communist Centre Union, Alice and Jasper have been invited to move in to THE HOUSE by

some of their sort-of comrades, who see potential for establishing a new squat and/or a defacto base of operations for the group's scattered and lackadaisical activities - an idea which Alice, still smarting from her recent exclusion from the middle class family idyll in which she grew up, soon takes to heart.

Recognising what was once a well-appointed Home beneath the bleak façade of The House, Alice becomes obsessed with restoring the rotting shell into some semblance of liveability (and, crucially, respectability), in spite of the total lack of interest in this project exhibited by the majority of her shiftless and damaged co-habitants.

Along with the fragile and fractious interplay between the various extreme personalities who comprise this nascent commune, Alice's misguided determination to turn this condemned shithole into into a surrogate for the comfortable bourgeois home from which she has been exiled as a result of her ruined relationships with her parents, soon becomes the most compelling thread of the book's narrative, with the practical detail of her exhaustive labours consistently overshadowing more outlandish terrorist/thriller plotline which develops along the way.

Meanwhile, Campbell's approach to The House in 'The Nameless' is rather more convoluted, but I'll do my best to outline it for you without getting too caught up in the treacherous weeds of plot summarisin'.

Basically then - thirteen years before the events of the novel take place, protagonist Barbara Waugh was a young mother in a commuter belt town, until her life was torn asunder when, in quick succession, her husband was killed in military service, and her young daughter kidnapped at the school gates by persons unknown. Distressingly, the girl is subsequently found dead - her body rendered unidentifiable as a result of a shotgun blast to the head, but her clothes and other evidence making identification undeniable, even as the motive and perpetrators of the crime remain a mystery.

Cut to the novel's present day, and, remarkably, Barbara has overcome the trauma of these early experiences, and has built a career for herself as a successful literary agent. Living in a swanky flat in the Barbican complex, her day-to-day comprises transatlantic phone conferences, weekend trips to

New York and wine bar heart-to-hearts with highly strung authors, in between which she enjoys an on-off relationship with one of her neighbours, Ted, a former antiquarian bookseller who has sold his business to try to make it as a novelist.

In other words, Barbara has effectively relocated to the middle of the Martin Amis novel - but, given the state she found herself in during the prologue, who can blame her?

Unfortunately for our heroine's aspirational yuppie lifestyle though, Ramsey Campbell is still at the controls, so naturally it's not long before she begins receiving a series of cryptic messages and frightening, inexplicable phone calls, which together serve to convince her that her long-lost daughter may in fact still be alive, and trying to contact her.

Information gleaned from an encounter with another distraught parent, who believes her own child's disappearance is connected to that of Barbara's daughter, leads her, eventually, to THE HOUSE - or, in this case, merely one of many such houses temporarily occupied by the literally nameless members of a transient torture/murder cult.

A truly terrifying creation, this cult has no stated goals or ideology, produces no literature and solicits no money from its destitute adherents, leaving no trail behind it as it moves furtively between abandoned houses in the dead of night, coaxing homeless people, addicts and runaways inside with promises of food and shelter, before… well, this is a horror novel, and a horribly effective one, so imagine the absolute worst and you'll be get the general idea.

When Barbara reaches the first of several HOUSES explored during the novel, the cult is long gone, leaving behind little evil odours, slimy floors and an all-consuming aura of psychic unease. As she explores the house though, I was struck by just how similar the descriptions were to those of the house Alice and Jasper arrive at in the opening chapter of 'The Good Terrorist' some five years later.

Upstairs, mildewed walls and greasy sleeping bags on dusty floorboards in otherwise empty upstairs bedrooms. Downstairs, loose cables torn from

kitchen walls, dangling hazardously in pools of stagnant water; dead birds rotting on the linoleum. Toilet bowls filled with concrete to render them unusable. These details are reiterated in almost identical fashion in both books, causing me to wonder whether Lessing and Campbell may even have been inspired by the same TV news report or documentary; perhaps one attempting to expose the unsavoury methods employed by the police and local councils to deter squatters? (A thoughtless and disgusting set of semi-official policies apparently widely in use at the time, these 'wrecking' tactics are justifiably railed against by Alice in 'The Good Terrorist'.)

For her part, Lessing is *slightly* more charitable than Campbell to the residents of her nasty, filthy house - but sometimes not by much.

Following 'The Good Terrorist's publication, readers may have wondered exactly where a wealthy and successful novelist in her mid-sixties acquired such detailed and ostensibly convincing insider knowledge of the mid '80s squatting scene. Could the novel perhaps have been inspired by someone close to Lessing becoming involved in squatting or radical politics? There certainly seems to be a hefty dose of straight autobiography invested in the cynical, heartbroken character of Alice's mother, suggestive perhaps of a family connection.

For now though, I'll leave further investigation of that to those with the time to scan through biographies and memoirs. For our purposes here, I'll simply note that, whilst Lessing often expresses sympathy toward her characters here on an individual basis, she clearly takes a pretty dim view of their lifestyle and beliefs.

With the exception of Alice herself (who is merely dangerously misguided), the core members of Lessing's commie splinter group are an ineffectual, slovenly bunch whose actions are, in their own way, just as mindless and destructive as those of Campbell's nameless cult. When mentioned at all, their grand ideological principles are painted as flaccid, contradictory and boring, with the absence of direct political argument from the novel presumably reflecting not only the author's lack of patience with it, but also the characters' crucial lack of engagement with the ideology they are supposedly willing to kill and die for.

Vis-à-vis the age-old gothic 'house-as-reflection-of-its-inhabitants' device which Lessing employs to a certain extent in the book, it is notable I think that, when Alice first enters The House, the top floor is literally filled with buckets of shit. (An unfortunate consequence of the 'concreted toilet' situation.)

The real hook of the novel therefore emerges from the older author's conflicted attitude toward her younger characters - despairing of their deluded, self-sabotaging behaviour, whilst also imbuing them with a wealth of all-too-human complexity, marinated in vast reserves of maternal empathy.

Whilst the feckless and ornery Jasper and the organisation's other male ideologues are written off as a waste of space, secondary characters such as lesbian couple Roberta and Faye are beautifully drawn, proud misfits - the former shielding the psychologically shattered latter from the travails of the outside world, as both react violently against the bourgeois concepts of comfort and cleanliness which Alice thoughtlessly tries to introduce into their defiantly trashed, punkoid netherworld.

Meanwhile, other passing spirits sucked into The House's vortex - such as alienated Afro-Caribbean drummer Jim, or Philip, a would-be carpenter/tradesman let down by his physical frailty - are heart-rendingly pitiful creations; innocent victims drawn into the emotional maelstrom of the book's contemporary gothic manse, and destroyed by it as surely as any white-gowned, candle-clutching maiden.

Although squatting culture itself is only tangential to the story Campbell is telling in 'The Nameless', he also engages with left wing politics to a certain extent, via a sub-plot involving a character named Gerry, a journalist for underground paper 'Other News' who goes undercover in an attempt to infiltrate the book's mysterious cult.

In a sense, Campbell's description of the terraced house which serves as the offices for the paper presents a deliberate counterpoint to The House, in which the ill-fated Gerry eventually ends up. Both are squalid and filthy, as Barbara's visit to the Other News offices is characterised by an "airless

stench", uncomfortable, makeshift furnishings, "scummy" coffee mugs, unemptied ash trays, and - horror of horrors for a chic Barbican resident - "atrocious" coffee with cream-flecked milk, served in a chipped mug. Nonetheless though, there is a sense of industry, clutter, colour and chaos here - of communication, human warmth and the presence of *people* - a rare and reassuring thing to encounter in the worlds of either of these novels.

Describing her position at the paper as "..the wettest and grubbiest job this side of North Sea Oil," Gerry aspires to take her investigation of the nameless cult to one of the broadsheets, even dreaming of a book deal, and what limited background we get on her character is framed around her clashes with Other News's sniffy, ideologically-driven editor. Either character could easily have passed through the pages of Lessing's novel, perhaps commuting from a temporary sleeping bag on the floor of Alice's House, and, though Campbell's take on radical politics seems just as jaundiced, it is nonetheless astonishing to look back on the world portrayed here from an early 21st century POV, and to realise that these then-cynical sketches of the underground/squatting milieu now seem almost *aspirational* in comparison to our own sorry state.

Imagine if you will, a world in which (like Barbara in 'The Nameless') we could swing 'round the offices of our friendly, local counter-culture paper to pitch a story (even though the coffee's shit and editor's a bit of a pillock), or in which we could (like Alice in 'The Good Terrorist') turn up unannounced at our local council offices to discuss the status of our squatted property, and not only manage to speak to a named human being, but actually receive a fair hearing, a certain degree of recognition, and promises of affirmative action to address our concerns.

Indeed, though neither of these novels set out to paint even a remotely positive picture of their era, comparing the fine detail of their settings to the cruel realities of the 21st century urban environment, it is difficult not to be struck by the nigh-on utopian opportunities which these novels' characters take for granted, at a point when the late-era GLC (for all its flaws) still held sway within London, and the Thatcherite wrecking ball was still midway through its first, slow swing.

True - mayhem, murder, mind-destroying terror, psychological collapse, botched terrorist outrages, crushed limbs, slit throats, interrogation by the CID or the spectacle of faceless, hooded supernatural entities being coaxed out of the back a transit vans by staff-wielding cultists - all these ordeals wait in store for Campbell and Lessing's characters later in the page count, detracting somewhat from the retrospectively rose-tinted glow of a quasi-socialist 1980s wonderland presented in these two endearingly bleak novels, so similar in tone and texture that they sometimes feel as if they could be taking place in parallel on neighbouring streets…. but only slightly.

END NOTES

Some of this writing has previously appeared in amended form at;
https://breakfastintheruins.blogspot.com/
…where you can go to find much, much more of the same.

*

All forms of correspondence, feedback etc welcomed at:
breakfastintheruins@gmail.com

In particular, contributions for future issues are actively sought / encouraged, as it would be great to widen this thing out to include other voices, in the event I decide to keep it going.

Related to which, I'm aware that this first issue has ended up being pretty male-centric, Brit-centric, and indeed London-centric - none of which was intentional, so if you see an opportunity to shift focus within the rules set out on page # 1, get in touch.

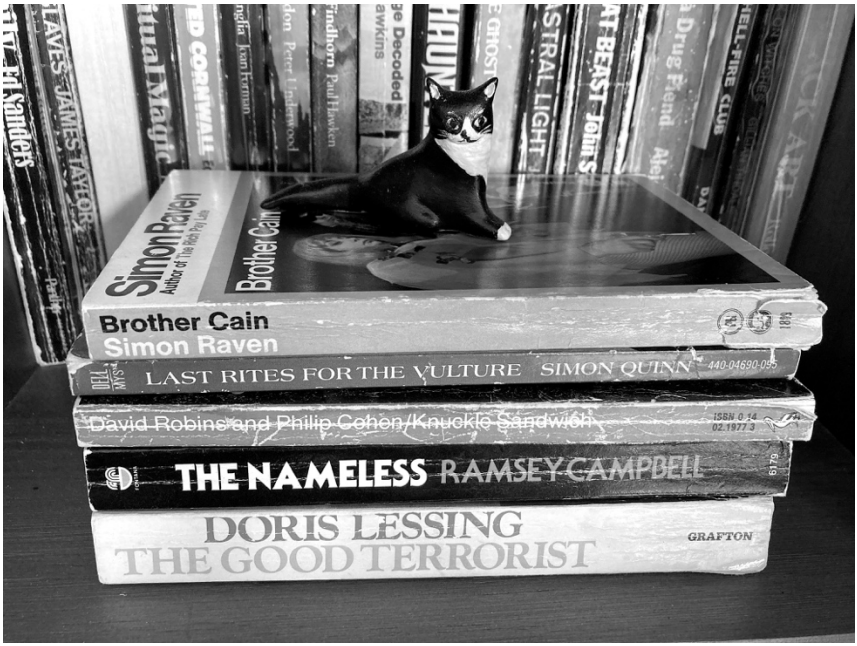
*

A few quick shout-outs to publications which have helped inspire my decision to return to paper: The Books Review of Books, Alternative Strategies, Bedabbled. Look 'em up.

*

Printed August 2025, and priced as close to unit printing cost as possible if bought directly. No profit / no problem.

Thanks for reading.

For good or ill, this is a work of the imagination. To the best of my knowledge and faith, there exists no Organisation such as is described in these pages, whether sponsored by, or independent of, our own Government. By the same token, references to existing institutions, their structure and personnel, are not to be taken as reflecting the realities. The American Embassy in Vienna may, or may not, employ a second secretary (commercial). His name is not Rudolf Armiger and he does not appear in this book.
S.R.

It goes without saying that the Otford nursery school is my invention. Up to the time of writing there is no Barclaybank machine in Glasgow.